

# The Albany HERALD

By Terry Lewis

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*A device designed to keep sleepy drivers awake took four years to patent*

**ALBANY, GA** — In the early morning hours of the summer of 1997, Howard Fields' tractor trailer slammed into another rig on Interstate 75 near Atlanta.

An investigation later revealed he had been asleep at the wheel for nearly five miles before plowing into the rear of the other truck.

That accident cost his company more than \$500,000 and forced an early retirement, ending his 21-year commercial driving career.

It also gave the 60-year-old Poulan native time to think about how to prevent such accidents in the future.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), drowsiness or fatigue is the principal cause of up to 100,000 vehicle crashes every year, killing at least 1,500 people and injuring 71,000. Many more fatigue-related crashes go unreported.

Fields began exhaustive research into the prevention of sleep-deprived driving.

“I was looking at what was already available in the market other than chemical products like No-Doze,” Fields said. “The mechanical devices already on the market were limited. Several devices were good and lived up to their designs but were not user-friendly.”

Then just over four years ago, Fields had an idea. Why not work the device onto the vehicle’s steering wheel?

The result? The Wake Buddy.

According to Fields’ website, “Wake Buddy is an alarm system that easily mounts to the steering wheel of any motor vehicle. Once installed, this steering wheel cover includes a sensor system to ensure correct pressure and contact is being made with the steering wheel, a timing device that alerts the driver if the required feedback is not provided in a reasonable amount of time and a visual monitoring system to assist the driver to maintain alertness.

“The sensors reside in locations where a driver would commonly place his or her hands on the steering wheel. The driver operates the vehicle as he or she normally would, with one or two hands. The pressure will be detected by the sensors, which will transmit a message to reset the timing sequence. If the driver does not replace his hand(s) on the wheel in the allotted amount of time, Wake Buddy will provide a audio warning.”

It took Fields more than four years to patent the device. He is now working with a marketing engineering firm in Atlanta to locate a production facility and assist in marketing.

“I’d like to make it in the USA,” Fields said.

On Wednesday, Fields was honored by U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop, D-Albany, who praised the local inventor.

“They say necessity is the mother of invention and I think Mr. Fields certainly proves that point,”

Bishop said. "I think that Mr. Fields has developed a product of need and one that will also save countless lives."

Fields say he hopes to have Wake Buddy on the market soon and that he anticipates the base model will retail for around \$29.95.



**U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop, right, honored local inventor Howard Fields Wednesday for his device which makes operating a motor vehicle safer.□ The Wake Buddy alerts drivers when they get sleepy behind wheel.**